

FROM

Creatures

BY CRISSY VAN METER



We lied about many things, but we never lied about weather. The constant foreboding of eerily colored skies, the dry summer winds, and the densely fogged harbor mornings did not hide. Even the mainlanders saw weather hovering over Winter Island as if it were a wall of dry island that had erupted from the Pacific Ocean to protect Los Angeles from oncoming absurdities. It sprouted from the bottom of the sea, angry and no stranger to loneliness.

That day, we thought the tsunami was just a hoax. A seaman rang the bell as he rounded the harbor. Preparations were made. Windows boarded. Evacuations planned. A deep chill lingered, and Dad had to hide his weed and coke. Just in case, he said. Just in case we made it out alive, he meant.

We were renting a room in back, the only way we could live like that, from two baseball players who were Dodgers, or once-Dodgers, and who had invested their injury retirement money into a monstrous vacation home on the Western Shore of Winter Island. In the early mornings, the neatly packed mansions left a shadow upon the sea. My whole world was a pile of sparkly jewels, salty men who loved the bottle, and rich families who vacationed for sport.

I don't know how Dad met the twins—maybe through cocaine slanging, or jokes over beers, or friends of friends—but Dad loved living in that glass-walled-concrete monstrosity. It had a pool.

Dad raised me like a boy, and with mostly no mother and many cardboard boxes of macaroni-and-cheese dinners. Sometimes we'd have hot dogs with fancy German names, and sometimes we'd eat a box of warm doughnuts with small cartons of chocolate milk. Sometimes we had money; sometimes

we didn't. Sometimes there were storms, and sometimes sunburns. We lived on fake money, famous money, and drug money, and always, it was just enough to never leave the island.

It was my fifth-grade teacher who parted metal blinds and gulped at the darkness building over the Pacific and said it was coming. That we'd all have to go home quickly. Without lunch. I scrounged nickels from other people's desks for a bag of Doritos and walked the shoreline home. The sea smelled saltier, and the air, thicker, and I shoved chips in my mouth, in case that was dinner.

Dad heard it on the TV while he was railing lines with the twins in the kitchen. They said it was coming and nothing could stop it. We were all to leave Winter Island. Los Angeles sent its gratitude to the little island that protects it from the wrath of the ocean, the newswoman said.

"You're fucking welcome," Dad said to the TV.

Islanders started a steady evacuation, and then dark pillows of clouds came. Neighbors sandbagged their doors and taped up windows. Otto House pedaled its hotel guests to the ferry on surrey bikes, with luggage tied to the sagging canvas top. Dad and the twins moved the bikes and pool toys into the garage. The ferry would close by twilight, and then we'd be on our own.

"We're not fucking leaving," he said.

"Will it really wash us away?" I asked.

Dad, who was born on Winter Island, said we'd stay, that we'd have a party to celebrate that monumental blessing from Mother Nature. No matter what could happen, he was not going to leave. He said we'd be just fine, like always, and that if the ship were *motherfucking going down*, we were going, too.

We bought the last of the ground beef from the butcher, and enough other food for a few days. Just in case the island actually flooded and the ferries never came back, Dad said we'd need protein, and that he could cook anything by fire. Dad said we'd be okay until help came or, as the twins suggested, we'd be better yet if no one ever came back. We bought the last of the old Easter candy on the sale aisle, water balloons just in case there would be time for fun, all of the chips, and a bag of apples, because the twins liked to eat healthy. When we returned home, I broke into the chips like they were a

cherished birthday present and ate them without caution. Perhaps we should have planned our rations better. Perhaps we should have considered leaving then, so we wouldn't be stuck there forever. Alone.

THE OXYCONTIN PILL GUY and Dad's coke friend stopped in. They were preparing for the end of the world, with the amount of illegal treasures they stashed in our kitchen drawers.

"You want cheese on your burger?" Dad asked.

He was wearing his KISS THE KOOK apron.

"Let's eat before this rain gets too heavy," he said.

Those who weren't leaving—the other single dads, a few Playmates the twins had over often, and the other beach druggies—began to take shelter at our place. They jumped in the pool and screamed things about the end of days.

By late afternoon, I could feel something was different. The color left. The clouds crept closer until they hung overhead. Dad and his buddies were so high they didn't notice. I floated on a plastic raft and watched black clouds cover the sun, smashing potato chips into my mouth and slowly swaying to the sound of waves nearby. Light rain tickled my face and made tiny pops against the pink plastic inflatable. I called for Dad, but the music was too loud. It all reminded me of the last eclipse—the time we stayed out all night to watch the moon turn into a purple sore and then watched *The Twilight Zone* on our little TV until there was sun.

The fake-boobied Playmates wore string bikinis before the real rain came. They draped the twins' press-conference-suit jackets over their shoulders and dipped their feet in the pool. They brought a gallon of Neapolitan ice cream and begged to braid my hair. I liked their tight gold skin and their painted-on eyebrows. They were like Barbies but bigger. The women that came in and out of that place were pretty and tall, and probably so nice to me because they pitied us. One of them would always feel so bad for Dad, so single and abandoned by a wretched, unloving woman. Those nights, I slept in my bunk alone.

The police were making their final rounds as the sun began to set. They begged people to leave. The lifeguards patrolled the dense, wet sand and boarded up their towers. They said there was no protection anymore. An officer had a clear plastic poncho stretched over his uniform. He commented

on the chocolate dried to my face while he stood under the soaked porch awning—a place he often stopped to be part of the party when he could.

“You guys are on your own,” he said.

The pill guy climbed to the roof, shirt off, and shouted at the sea. A dried nosebleed began to wash away from his face. He said that he could actually see the water receding. The news had said it would happen like that: We’d hit an all-time low tide, then an all-time high. There would be so much rising water that we’d flood and go under. If it hit us head-on, we might never see the mainland again. It wouldn’t be a big wave, but a slow parade of water. The cokeheads cheered in anticipation while Dad wrapped me in a towel.

“Wash the chlorine out of your hair,” he said.

We tossed water balloons in the rain, and the wild ones hollered at the clouds. At low tide, Dad bundled me in trash bags and a baseball cap and we followed his buddies to the shore. We stood like a wall, my hands protected by Dad’s, and the pretty Playmates guarded the house behind us. The wind seeped through every crevice of our trash-bag clothes, and we whistled and whined at the extreme darkness spread evenly across the horizon. Together, we walked to where the sea met our feet. Mounds of dead sand crabs looked as if they’d died trying to find water, and the shrunken trash, broken shells, and seaweed were no longer a mysterious part of the ocean’s floor.

“The pier is swaying,” a twin said.

The lights were out at Rocky’s Fish N Chips, and the rest of the old wooden pier stood like a bridge that had lost its way to land. Dad threw a piece of slimy seaweed at me. The twins found a wet tennis ball and traced the lines of a baseball diamond in the sand with their toes while the rowdy wind whipped around and we sounded like sails in a storm. The pill guy swung a big stick at the ball, and as he rounded the trash-pile bases, Dad tagged him out. The sea slowly devoured our playing field, and with absolutely frozen toes, we hurried back to the house. Then, hard rain.

“Take a good look, Evie. It might be your last,” OxyContin said.

Dad flicked him on the back.

“I’d never let anything happen to you,” Dad said.

He always said it.

I ate the rest of the chips for dessert that night. Dad danced to records and spun me around in the office chair until I felt sick. Playmate Sasha taught me

how to do the twist while rain pounded into the pool and a demonic wind rattled the windows.

Once we lost power, we crouched around lighted bathroom candles, and Sasha sang old country songs. The kind that made Dad's heart hurt. Then I was tucked in tightly on the top bunk for safekeeping.

We didn't hear all the water rising around us, or the sound of glass breaking, or the pool overflowing. We didn't hear nearby windows shatter or smell salt leaking into our living room. Dad was passed out cold, and I, dreadfully exhausted from chips and anticipation, slept through the worst of it.

In the morning, among the shadows made from partial sunshine, our house was flooded and smelled like a sunken ship. We had to paddle out in inner tubes and pool noodles to get anywhere on the bottom floor. Dad said not to swallow any of it. And when we recovered, red-eyed and lost, we began to clean up the mess. A cleanup that would take the actual rest of our lives. Still, we shouted wildly at the sea and called ourselves survivors.

CREATURES

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